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‘Mud in my ears and jam in my beard’: Challenging gendered ways of being in nature kindergarten practitioners

Abstract

Nature kindergartens present opportunities to foster a love of natural environments through formative early childhood experiences. Three early childhood education settings – one in Denmark, one in Finland and one in Scotland – provided insight into nature kindergarten provision that has historically attracted a high proportion of male staff. At the three cases, this qualitative study recorded observation and interview data during 53 sessions across 16 months, with each setting being visited once in each season. Work by Foucault (1976, 1978) and Connell (2005) permit a deeper understanding of the ways in which different environments may afford specific kinds of social interaction that privilege certain ‘ways of being’. This paper provides a nuanced consideration of how masculinities and femininities, shaped through governing socio-cultural discourses, are evident in nature kindergarten practice. The findings feature descriptions of simple, quotidian practices that have local relevance to each setting and were recognized to support nature-based learning. Such practices are influenced by practitioner-held, gendered dispositions and orientations towards nature that collectively underpin career choice and sustain contributions to the early childhood education workforce. This research adds to the developing literature regarding nature kindergartens, nature-based learning and early-childhood education and offers suggested directions for future research.

Keywords

Outdoor play, Nature Kindergarten, Early childhood education, Gender, Nature-based learning

In Western societies, nature kindergarten is a distinctive form of early childhood education that intersects early childhood education and outdoor learning fields (MacQuarrie, Nugent, and Warden 2015, Lysklett, Emilsen, and Hagen 2003). Nature kindergartens use forests, woodlands and beaches where simple, ephemeral features inherent to their environment and location allow a ‘flexibility of practice’ and unpredictability not available in conventional, indoor spaces. Days are spent outdoors in all weathers—chopping firewood, foraging, den building and cooking—with side effects, such as insect bites, splinters and nettle stings that afford human / nature and human / human interactions that benefit children’s relationships with the rest of nature (Liefländer et al. 2013). Nature kindergartens present opportunities to, amongst other benefits outside the scope of this paper, foster a love of and care for, the outdoors through formative early-childhood experiences for children aged 6 years and under (Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards 2013, Chawla and Cushing 2007, Ewart, Place, and Sibthorp 2005); for staff working in this domain, nature kindergartens have been found to satisfy adult preferences to revisit their own childhoods (Brody 2015).

Environmental educators play a central role in what children get to experience (Kals, Schumacher, and Montada 1999) and adult beliefs surrounding the use of outdoor spaces are known to shape early childhood education practice (Nugent and Beames 2017, Ernst and Tornabene 2012). While early childhood education continues to be routinely delivered within a gendered social context, as females outnumber males (Wohlgemuth, 2015), this phenomenon appears to be less marked in nature kindergartens. Peeters, Rohrmann and Emilsen (2015) report that the underlying explanations for this disparity to the early childhood education workforce are not fully understood. Presumably there could be some connection between the nature-based orientation in culture and the attraction that working outdoors presents, and this

enquiry forms a feature of the research being reported. For example, the early childhood education sector average of 3% male staff (OECD 2014) increases to 19% (Lysklett 2005) in Norway—a nation where an increasing proportion of kindergartens are labelled ‘outdoor’ (Bugge, 2006). Thus, a gap in the literature is emerging that exposes the dearth of research examining masculinities and femininities amongst the educators within nature kindergarten practices. This paper contributes to the corpus of early childhood education by considering how masculinities and femininities are shaped through governing socio-cultural discourses through a multi-case study of nature kindergartens. This paper also locates itself within the developing literature regarding gender and culture within the broader field of early childhood education and builds on previous publications that have reported specific lines of investigation based on the longitudinal data that examined the mode and form of nature-based learning (MacQuarrie, Nugent, and Warden 2015) and considered the use of foraging practices to transmit cultural norms (Nugent and Beames 2017).

Adopting a Foucaultian lens to interrogate what we argue is the ‘gendered space’ of nature kindergartens proved fruitful. Drawing on Foucault’s (1976) concept of ‘regimes of truth’ Connell (2013) explains how masculine identities are constructed through ‘gender regimes’. These regimes influence how individuals take on culturally-embedded gender roles that are expressed through their bodies and personalities. If early-childhood education is understood as a Foucaultian (1976) ‘discourse’ that shapes how bodies, gestures, and desires are constituted, then nature kindergartens may offer their own, subtly contrasting discourse that is equally capable of mediating notions of gender roles in specific ways. It follows that nature kindergartens provide a ‘regulatory frame’ for ‘repeated acts’ that cement specific gender identities (Butler 1990, 33). These acts are ‘fictions’—as Butler called them—

that are regulated by what Foucault (1978) referred to as *norms*, which ‘lead to the assumption that gender identities are natural and essential’ (Duffy 2011, 6). Seen this way, gender is not pre-determined nor stable, but is repeatedly constituted and reconstituted through participation in social discourses (Davis 2003). It is these discourses that constitute the gendered social interactions surrounding the pedagogues working in nature kindergartens that is our chief concern.

Methods

The multi-case study (Stake 2006) involved selecting three case settings from an earlier scoping exercise that applied four specific criteria regarding both practical and research-based parameters. For example, the settings comprised woodland or forest with a watercourse (lake, stream or both), included English-speaking practitioners, and children attended five days per week during term time.

Data collection

A longitudinal case study formed the data collection for the study and occurred in three countries to profile nature kindergartens. Data were recorded during each season across 16 months at one nature kindergarten each in Denmark, Finland and Scotland. The selection of two Nordic countries and a further established provider of Nature Kindergartens merits a comparative approach. Fifty-three observations were supplemented by 12 interviews with adult practitioners (five male and two female).

Verbal and written consents were sought from both adult and child participants as well as each child’s parents. The right to withdraw was offered ahead of, during and post data collection and the researcher was vigilant in seeing participants’ non-verbal expressions of reluctance to continue to participate during

data collection (Langston et al. 2004). In depth methodological details of these observation visits and methods to record data have been published previously (MacQuarrie, Nugent, and Warden 2015) and the following provides a summary. Observations used a systematic protocol: three-minute scans were completed at half-hourly intervals (MacQuarrie, Nugent, and Warden 2015) to capture location, interaction and allowed a 'peripheral membership' role to be adopted by the researcher (Adler and Adler 1998, 85). Also recorded were seasonal fluctuations in weather (Fjørtoft 2004) and participant engagement with multi-sensory qualities of the forest settings (Henwood and Pidgeon 2001). Practitioner interviews took place post-observation, as this approach supports the collection of opinions and reflections focused on practice that precedes it (Brown and MacIntyre 1993). Interviews were recorded on an audio-visual 'Flip' device. Data verification involved adult and child participants being given opportunities to review and comment on the accurate representation of all texts and recordings. Participant feedback minimized researcher bias (Lincoln and Guba 2000, Kawulich 2005) to have a reflexive affect upon the researcher's interpretations and worldview.

Following Braun & Clarke's (2006) distinctive, procedural phases while coding evolved throughout the analytical process to assist with interpreting the observed practices. Coding was seen as an ongoing, iterative process, whereby codes were merging, splitting and appearing with each new data discovery, each seasonal visit. In this way, thematic analysis highlighted patterns in the data that directly related to practice and practitioner dispositions towards nature, influences on practitioner job choice, and on the experiences of children in their care. The coding process culminated in the creation of 45 codes, which were aggregated through a logical chain of evidence (Creswell 2009) to create two principal themes.

Findings and discussion

The first of two principal findings centres on practice aimed at building human relationships with nature by considering how practitioners took advantage of what nature afforded each season. The second theme draws on enactments of masculinity and femininity in order to understand each individual staff member's actions and words. Together, these discussions enable us to address our aims of more deeply comprehending the degree to which practitioner behaviours may be more gendered in nature kindergarten contexts than in their indoor counterparts.

Simple practices to share locally relevant messages

First-hand experiences were sought daily with local environments, across all three settings, by all seven practitioners. The unpredictability of nature was exploited to encourage immediate and meaningful associations between child and learning environment:

I love that the plan is 'we go find' and this is less confusion. Here is the freedom from the need to be doing all the time. When we go find you are choosing and that makes us more focused on what is interesting to each person and learn the things that they find. Not everyone is the same. Not everyday is the same.

(Male practitioner, Danish case)

We do not do the heavy stuff. We want strong and positive relationships to come slowly so we walk and talk about what the nature brings each day.

(Female practitioner, Danish case)

During the Finnish winter, participants were observed re-using empty, one-litre milk cartons by filling them with water dyed with natural food colours¹.

Practitioners explained that while exciting and memorable for children, the practice had wider value, as environmental concerns were gently introduced. In this example, recycling is fun and offered in an appropriate seasonal context, on a scale appropriate for the age group. Moreover, this activity did not occur in isolation. The practitioner stressed that tentative preparation with the children was instigated earlier in the year, to support the activity:

The children learn to recycle as extra to playing with frozen water. We do not try to do ‘Today at kindergarten we will save the planet’. This is not our day. Saving the planet will come after good habits—‘We save the packages’—and so in summer the ice is not forming in the forest, but always saving the cartons is now what we do.

(Female practitioner, Finnish case)

Opportunities to link practice with features of the local environment were observed across cases where practitioners related children’s understanding to prior educational activities. In Scotland, sheltered inside a den, a male practitioner and two children discussed the weather and how it could be used to their advantage. Sectioned bamboo poles were attached by the ‘guttering squad’ on the outside of the den, coupled with a rainwater storage system, and remained in place on subsequent observation visits. In the following exchange, a male practitioner helped children to

¹ The previous day, practitioners and children had prepared their dyes by mixing tea, coffee and berry juice.

find and select resources, knot ropes and consulted children during a construction activity:

Child A: We want to keep our carpet dry and if the roof leaks we'll be in trouble.

Child B: My dad fixed the gutters at my house. They were leaking over the top and my dad went up the ladder to fix it and said guttering stopped the rain coming into the roof.

Male practitioner: Do we have what we need to keep this den dry inside?

Child B: It's not raining that much today but we need to be ready for it. We can fix them to the outside and move it away from the roof.

Male practitioner: Good ideas here [...] what else could we do with the rain that comes off the gutters? Maybe Daddy does this at home?

Child B: Catch the rain in a bucket, a big bucket and it is water for the garden when it's not raining.

(Extract from the Scottish case)

The above extracts contrast to 'education through catastrophe' (jungle deforestation, diminishing polar ice caps) that may overwhelm young children, risk premature abstraction (Coffey 2001), and serve to nurture pessimistic outlooks or anxieties rooted in ecophobia (Strife 2012). Nature walks, milk carton ice bricks, and makeshift rainwater storage together evidence the gradual introduction of environmental stewardship as appropriate for young children, and fit with Sobel's (2008) suggestion 'no tragedies before fourth grade' (p.41). So far, it may be arguable that the presented findings are not overtly gendered. However, a further message lies in the highlighted expressions of 'care'—a trait routinely referred to as feminine. In

both the Danes' gradual pedagogy and the Scot's conservation messages, there was an embedded twofold perspective of caring—for the child and for the natural world.

Practitioners displayed caring orientations and did not attempt to alter their interactions in order to invoke essentialist, behavioural norms. In this regard nature kindergartens, as a workplace, may challenge masculine (or feminine) identities in ways reported elsewhere in early childhood education (Brody 2015). A feature of nature kindergartens appears to be their potential to foster a range of actions from both men and women that contrasts with expectations regarding indoor early childhood education.

Gender parity in the workforce and workplace parity

The three-minute scans and post-observation interviews revealed that each of the three cases used fire for warmth, for wonderment, to heat food and as a social site. Sharing responsibility for the fire included gathering and chopping wood and was an example where situational needs overcame masculine or feminine depiction of roles. A love of outdoors heightened motivations to enter a fulfilling career for all seven practitioners in the present study. That said, while male staff frequently spent leisure time hunting, fishing, paddling or on the hill, both females had family commitments and reported that opportunities to relax outdoors outside of their job were limited, despite their preference for it. This tension between family commitments and personal leisure and skill development time has been noted in the outdoor education literature (Humberstone 2000, Allin and West 2013). Still, the experience of outdoor living held by each pedagogue, meant that men and women shared an understanding of the inherent toil:

It can be tough. Like the trolley gets stuck in the mud, getting kit dry – it's just extra stuff to get done at the end of a tiring day, but it's all part and parcel of doing something worthwhile but having fun at the same time.

(Male practitioner, Scottish case)

Here, the practitioner was happy to be working strenuously with children, but was doing so in a place and in ways he was passionate about. His fond childhood memories contributed to his work ethic and contributed to his understanding of nature's characteristic features. Similarly, the Danes and Finns evidenced their preference to combine work and leisure interests, by using words like 'fun', 'true love' and 'hobby' to express how their pursuit of outdoor lives married with their career. One Danish female educator commented that 'Being in the nature is true love. For me, this is perfect to share nature, show the children and be paid too', while a Finnish male explained that nature was near his heart—his hobby—and that he 'wouldn't be interested in returning to indoors work'.

The process by which the children acquired skills both affirmed and disrupted normative gendered associations. For example, female practitioners were observed to take responsibility for preparing lunch, but male practitioners also cooked; one male practitioner knew how to whittle birch twigs into whistles, yet his female colleague felled saplings with her 'especially favourite axe'. The abbreviated excerpt mentioned in the title of this paper comes from a statement offered by a Finnish practitioner 'It's lovely to come home from work with mud in my ears, paint on my shirt, blood on my pants and jam in my beard'. He was fulfilled by these features of his day. Observation of this practitioner (like other adults in the study) revealed a normative set of behaviours that related to his prior knowledge and experiences and

had developed in response to his workplace and the challenges that early childhood education presents (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Practitioners inhabited and expressed a plurality of masculinities and femininities without hesitation or apparent compromise to their self-worth. Practitioners valued such characteristics, and this became evident at the Finnish case during data collection when the first author slipped on ice, fell hard and (uncomplainingly) got back up. The female pedagogue, a short distance away, remarked ‘you’d make a good, strong Finnish woman’. Referencing Finnish women as gutsy and tenacious revealed traits that the Finnish pedagogue valued—traits not necessarily feminine or masculine, but rather recognised as norms required in relation to the working environment and operating within ‘workplace-specific’ discourses. Reported differences in ways of knowing can be otherwise considered as one’s personal epistemology (Belenky et al. 1986). When thought of in this way, it is easier to see how knowledge and ways of behaving lead to practitioners embracing the situated context through which children are. Nature kindergartens therefore use specific places as locations for learning and teaching, and practitioners link the content of experiences to what the environment provides.

Practice is fluid and makes considerations in response to daily conditions, while establishing connections across the seasons, thus offering continuation between experiences. Nature kindergarten offers a pedagogy that can introduce environmental education and depicts learning as involving person, place and context. Context is argued to be a crucial feature of early childhood education (Edwards 2004), and should be centred on what children have experienced, what they have yet to experience, where the experience occurs and who they are interacting with. Thus, by incorporating social and environmental context into learning, nature kindergarten

practitioners can be understood as influencing practice through the enactment of individual skills and orientations that challenge norms often associated with gender and ways of being in early childhood education.

This paper has established that layered, inter-woven experiences that link learning with the features of the local environment are central to nature kindergarten practice. While this study focused on practitioners, as a means of gaining understanding educators' ways of being in nature kindergartens, it is limited by this focus, as it has given insufficient attention to the children who were central to the interactions discussed. It is well established that parental expectations and experiences influence children's early school experiences (Barnett and Taylor 2009, McLean et al. 2018, Miller 2015, Wei et al. 2018). A rich avenue of further research would be to consider how the intergenerational knowledge children acquire from their family and home communities regarding gender roles and norms is reinforced or disrupted by their nature kindergarten experiences. Such a multi-layered investigation would go beyond the study being reported requiring data collection across children's worlds; including consideration of the different forms of early childhood education as well as their local communities and home lives.

Our central thesis is that the discourse surrounding nature kindergartens can be regarded as a Foucaultian (1976) 'regime of truth' that serves in defining and legitimating ways of being when working as a nature kindergarten practitioner. What is noteworthy, is that natural surroundings may provide norms of behaviour that are less binary than traditional male/female roles. As Zink and Burrows (2006) concluded, a Foucaultian perspective of outdoor learning can contest the ways participants construct their identities through knowing, thinking about and doing outdoor learning. The 'regulatory frame' of nature kindergartens appears to offer all

practitioners similar opportunities to undertake all roles—whether these involve using axes, lighting fires, foraging for food, and cooking food. Seen this way, Connell’s (2005) ‘gender regimes’ may still exist at some level, but are arguably much less dominant and are being challenged in practice. This bodes well for practitioners, but more so for the young people they influence through the repeated acts which serve to idealize gender identity (Butler 1990). The workplace of the nature kindergarten is as culturally-constituted as any other. We argue that this workplace features Foucaultian norms (1978) that lie in contrast to those typically encountered in many indoor-based organizations. These different norms may be less essentialist—and less restricting—in the ways they influence how men and women think and act. The appeal of such early childhood education to male and female staff could form a line of investigation in future research given the established discussion regarding male participation in early years education (Sumsion 2000, Peeters, Rohrmann, and Emilsen 2015, Brody 2015).

Summary and conclusion

This investigation considered how nature kindergarten pedagogues in three countries (Denmark, Finland and Scotland) interacted with their pupils and their nature environments across the 16-month research period. The findings make a significant contribution to the literature on early years education and nature-based learning. Crucially, we have highlighted that natural environments facilitate pedagogues adopting less binary male and female roles, in relation to job-related tasks.

A Foucaultian lens enables a critical consideration of observed behaviours and actions, as practitioners’ roles rest on individually relevant histories that are imbued

with relationships with nature (Kaufman et al. 2001, Wattchow 2008). This paper posits that deeply held dispositions, orientations and norms ‘serve to organize our thought and action’ (Allin and West 2013, 121) and influence practitioners to subtly transmit a love of nature in ways that are less gendered. A rejection of gender-stereotypical roles is regarded to be positive within the early childhood education sector (Warin and Adriany 2015). Yet, given that it is change at an individual, professional level that is likely to enhance the quality of early childhood education provision (Cameron, Moss, and Owen 1999), surely it is preferable to challenge stereotypes, rather than solely striving towards equivalent male to female ratios (or percentile increments) as set out by some arguably dated policy initiatives (Allin and West 2013, Jensen 1996, Emilsen 2012).

Nature-kindergartens allow a view of early childhood education practice that is contextualized by culture and place—a combination that likely incorporates a diverse workforce and is aware of plural masculinities and femininities that do not shy from encompassing either in practice. Such unfixed ways of being implores us to interrogate how ‘dualistic distinctions’ generally serve to limit our understandings of the world (Petersen 2003). In the name of meaningful and enduring environmental education, it is passionate, caring and self-aware practitioners who count most and who ultimately render gender cosmetic.

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